

LUKE 9:28-36, 46-50
GLORY AND GREATNESS?

Can you remember who the BBC's greatest ever Briton was in October 2002? Here are the top 10 people on the list: Isambard Kingdom Brunel; Winston Churchill, Charles Darwin, Diana Princess of Wales, Oliver Cromwell, John Lennon, William Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I, Horatio Nelson, Isaac Newton. Various people then had to plead their case and then we had to vote for the person we considered to be the greatest ever Briton. How do you measure greatness? It is one of these qualities that we really can't measure; whatever makes someone great in your eyes, might not count for much with me and vice versa! These people were the top 10 out of 100; they were there for their achievements, I suppose; some as political leaders whose leadership was crucial at certain times in the nation's history; others were there for their creative abilities in writing plays or songs, or great feats of engineering; others were there for understanding how the world works and for discovering important things like gravity! Do you remember who won? Churchill!

Any dictionary will define greatness in a variety of ways: it will talk about power and rank and status, that someone is top of the pile in their chosen field: prime minister, or president – they have a rank and status that puts them above all others. It will also talk about genius and skill, so that great people are able to do things that others can't do and can make the most difficult task look ridiculously easy. It might also talk about strength, that a great person is a strong person, who is physically able to do things that others can't. All of these are ways of understanding greatness in terms that we grasp quite easily, though it does seem that we use notion of 'greatness' much too glibly.

Jesus questions that whole notion of greatness and the way we understand what being great means. He turns these notions upside down as He shows us what He thinks makes people like you and me really great. He does that by the two episodes in Luke's gospel that we read. If you missed the last study in Luke 9, it will be on the website next week; you have the opportunity to discuss and study these passages again on Wednesday at our Discovery Groups. What makes us great? There are two episodes: 1)transfiguration; 2)'who is greatest?' At first glance these do not really belong together, but when we begin to look more closely, we see that they actually have much more in common than we realise.

1. The Transfiguration This is a strange event when we first begin to look at it. Last time we heard Jesus ask His disciples "*Who...*" (9:20) and Peter answered "*The...*" (9:21) to which Jesus immediately replied in terms of His suffering and death. At first glance this story shows a completely different side to Jesus. This happened about a week later and Jesus took His inner circle, Peter, James and John with Him up mountain to pray. "*As He...*" (v.29) This flash of light and brightness are symbolic in the old Testament of the presence of God: here is Jesus revealing something of the glory of the other world of which He is a part. Here He is revealing something of the glory that is His as the Son of God, the heavenly glory that He left behind when He was born in Bethlehem. All of this had been hidden for 30+ yrs, it had been hidden from

the disciples from beginning of Jesus' ministry, but now for a brief moment, to only 3 of the disciples, Jesus reveals something of the other side of His true self; that He is the glorious and great Son of God. These three men see something that no-one else had ever seen; they don't speak of it, because how do you describe something indescribable?

It is more important for Jesus, because the centre of the event is all about His sense of vocation. God has called Him to be the Messiah/Saviour. "*Two men...*" (9:30f) There are no greater figures in the Old Testament and in Israel's history than Moses and Elijah; Moses stands for whole tradition in Israel of law, as the great lawgiver, a great man in Israel's history and every Jew would count Moses a great man; the other stands for all the prophets, Elijah came to represent whole tradition of the prophets in Israel, so much so that God promised that another 'like Elijah' would come as the forerunner to the Messiah; that other 'like Elijah' was John the Baptist. These two men talk with Jesus, but what about? "*They spoke...*" (9:31) The word used here is 'exodus'; they spoke with Jesus about His exodus! Someone suggests three ways of understanding what this means: 1) His departure, that He would simply be going away. 2) His death as a euphemism, leaving this earth; 3) "Jesus will enact an event just like the great exodus from Egypt... Jesus will lead all God's people out of the slavery of sin and death and home to their promised inheritance." (Wright) If we bring all of these together, we see that Jesus will die, but by His death He will bring freedom to those who believe in Him. All of this will take place in Jerusalem. Moses and Elijah bear witness to Jesus that this is the kind of Messiah/Saviour that God has called Him to be.

If we only had the picture of Jesus in the transfiguration, we might begin to think of Him as some great warrior king who was going to sweep all before Him; all the forces of evil would be destroyed by this great and glorious king, like some great, good version of Genghis Khan sweeping across the plains of Asia knocking down all before Him. In fact, for Jesus, glory and greatness will be understood by a cross! There is a turning point in the gospel later in the chapter: "*As the...*" (9:51) and if it hadn't been true already, it was certainly true now, that the focus of Jesus' life and ministry, the calling with which God had called Him, was going to come to its climax and conclusion on a cross on another hill, this time outside the city wall of Jerusalem.

2. Who is the greatest? Do you remember the catchphrase of Muhammad Ali, one of the world's greatest ever boxers? He declared 'I am the greatest!' and at the peak of his power he had good reason to say it, but it always smacked of conceit; that he was good and knew he was good and would let everybody else know that he was good. "*An argument...*" (9:46) It seems quite unseemly for the followers of Jesus to be quarrelling about who was number one! This would only be the first of many discussions in the Church of Jesus about who should be the greatest; it is an argument that still can be heard today reverberating round the Church, though sometimes in disguise! "*Jesus knowing...*" (9:47f) Many of us were brought up with the notion that 'children should be seen and not heard!' In Jesus' day it was even worse than that: children were goods and chattels to be disposed of at a father's whim. There

was nothing important about children, nothing significant about them, they were the lowest, least important members of community.

There is a chain of welcome here in what Jesus says: *“Whoever...”* (9:48a) Welcome the child, first of all and if you do that, then you welcome Jesus; that in itself is startling enough. But there is another link in the chain: welcome Jesus *“Whoever...”* (9:48b) and so you welcome God. Both of these connections were quite startling for some. When we welcome a child, we welcome Jesus; our attitude to the lowest and least important members of the community are challenged here; we would be glad to welcome Jesus, but these others? We’re not quite so sure! Some would have felt that way about the second link in the chain: the Jews were happy to think that they could welcome the living God into the world, into their community, but to welcome Jesus? That was too much for them! He didn’t fit the mould! *“He who...”* (9:48) Greatness is not about being first and top of the heap; true greatness is found in serving the least and lowest people in our community and in our world.

“True greatness consists in lowly service.” (Morris) That is not what the world says. The people our world thinks great are the celebrities, the powerful people, the famous people, the rich people. For all that we complain about our politicians, we still are fascinated by power and by those who hold political power and there are still many people who aspire to be like them. Celebrities who are famous for being famous; people who are rich, others whom we consider great for other reasons and who make the glossy magazines – these are all quite different from the notion that greatness consists in service.

Jesus is our role model in this. Paul in Philippians chapter 2 is possibly quoting an early Christian hymn that celebrates the way in which Jesus lived. It is all about the One who did have glory, but who gave up that glory and *“did not...”* (Phil 2:6) That equality with God was His by right, but he chose to give it up and *“made Himself...”* (Phil 2:7f) His exaltation by God came later as direct result of His humbling Himself to serve and to die on the cross. For Jesus, greatness is cross-shaped. His true greatness is to be found in the fact that He was a crucified Saviour, that He gave His life to die on the cross for our sake, to serve us and to save us.

What we tend to overlook in this Philippians 2 passage are the words at the beginning: *“Your attitude...”* (2:5) The way in which we live life, our attitudes, should be shaped by what we see in Jesus. We need to renounce the ways of the world and stop trying to be top of the heap and stop trying to always get our own way and learn to serve one another, and learn to serve those who are the weakest and least important in our community and in our world. Humble: that’s not as attractive word as ‘great’! However, it is a word that we should learn to love and a word that we should learn to live by, that we are humble people; that does not mean that we are doormats for everybody else to trample over, but it does mean that we seek to serve others and care for others and love others as well as ourselves. This is about putting other people before ourselves, about considering what other people need before what I want; about putting to death concerns about my status, my opinion, and being willing to listen to other people’s views and asking how we can serve others in

the Church, the community, and the world. That will make us truly great by Jesus' values.

What makes us great? Our skill, our achievements, our power, our wealth, our fame, our strength? That's what the world values, these are the people who make the glossy magazines. Jesus values other things: His glory and part of His greatness was revealed for a moment on a hilltop somewhere in Galilee; but His real greatness was shaped by cross, and by His exodus in Jerusalem. That's the model for greatness that we should follow; our life, our attitudes, our behaviour should be shaped by Jesus and we should learn to be like Him. That is hard. It runs counter to the culture we live in, but is the better way! Our attitude should be shaped by Jesus, the glorious, great Son of God, humble, crucified, serving us and our world.